

## ON THE NET

### First, You Have to Hear It! ESL Oral Language Practice

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There is no question that the development of oral language skills in second (as well as first) language learners is of prime importance. Language learners must focus on oral language proficiency because it is eventually the skill they will most use. Indeed, "...oral language interactions account for the bulk of our day-to-day communications, remaining the primary mode of discourse through out the world" (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005, p. 119). But oracy in second language learners does not develop in a vacuum. It is inextricably intertwined with the other language skills (reading, writing, and listening). In addition, by the time students are studying a second language, they have begun learning literacy skills that we also wish to develop in the target language. The National Standards for Foreign Language Learning clearly support the notion of integration of skill areas with the goal area of Communication. The first standard in this goal area is 1.1: *Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions* (National Standards, 1999). This interpersonal communication standard implies two-way communication in which aural and oral language both play a key role.

Oral language development needs two essential elements in order to be maximally realized: comprehensible input (CI) and social interaction (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). The language learning environment, be it a classroom or other venue, should be structured to include CI as well as encourage the aforementioned two-way communication qua social interaction. In this column, we examine two sites that provide CI for English language learners and also make provision for subsequent two-way interchanges that allow learners to practice their oral output.



**Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab** provides the English language learner with many audio files that offer language sound bites on numerous topics. These sound files are graded "easy," "medium," and "difficult" as a guide for the instructor and/or self-motivated learner. According to the creator of the site, Randall Davis,

"the main goal has been to try to combine pedagogically-sound content while making use of Internet technology to deliver it .... to create listening activities with pre-, listening, and post-listening activities to build content schemata, help check students' understanding while introducing new vocabulary, and then encourage speaking activities to expand on language students have learned." (personal communication, July 14, 2005)

To that end, each audio file is supported by several components that enable the language learner to prepare for, negotiate, and master the CI. The example below, "Camping under the Stars," shows the information available to the learner who selects this audio clip and its concomitant activities. This particular clip is graded "medium." It is a conversation between a man and a woman, and lasts 1:17 minutes.

[Text Completion Quiz](#) | [Go to Quiz Script](#)

## Camping under the Stars

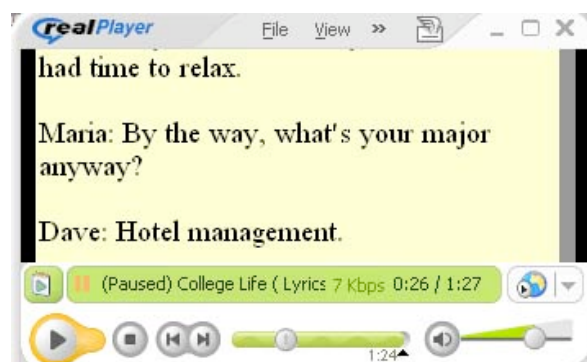
I. [Pre-Listening Exercises](#)

II. [Listening Exercises](#)

III. [Post-Listening Exercises](#)

Level:	Topic:	Type:	Speakers:	Length:
medium	camping	conversation	man - woman	01:17

As shown above, the language learner initially encounters pre-listening exercises: generally topical questions that serve as advance organizers (see Ausubel, Novak, & Hanesian, 1978; Hadley, 2001) for the listener. Next come listening exercises. The student presses a button on the screen to listen to the audio. While listening, the student can click on radio buttons for each question to make multiple choice responses. After finishing the quiz, the learner can click another button to see the score and correct responses.



The learner also has access to the audio script on another page, complete with glossed vocabulary. Some of the RealPlayer audio clips include scrolling captions for reading the script while listening -- for instance, the [College Life](#) audio.

In addition, the learner may take a text completion quiz with a modified cloze format and word bank. Again, the learner can click to see the score and correct responses. Finally, post-listening exercises lead the learner to and through the social interaction phase, suggesting topics for further expansion and discussion, organizing paired dialogs, or recommending group activities for learners.

On the [Self-Study Guide](#) page, the listening activities and audio files have been organized into topics. Generalized language functions are also indicated. The 15 topics listed are broad enough to be included in most any language course, from introductory to advanced levels: Introductions, Education and Work, Living Arrangments, Shopping and Money, Family Life and Relationships, Daily Schedules, Directions, On the Phone, Travel, Food and Dining Out, Descriptions, Sports and Recreation, Entertainment, Health, The World.

Easy (E), Medium (M), and Difficult (D)

Unit	Title	Listening Quizzes	Language Function
1	Introductions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <a href="#">Names 1</a> (E)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Names 2</a> (E)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Saying Hello and Goodbye</a> (E)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Greetings and Introductions</a> (E)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Randall's Introduction</a> (E)</li> <li>- <a href="#">So, where are you from?</a> (E)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Nice to Meet You</a> (E)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Haven't We Met Before?</a> (M)</li> </ul>	introducing yourself, greetings
2	Education and Work <a href="#">Interactive Crossword Printable Crossword</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <a href="#">College Life</a> (E)</li> <li>- <a href="#">A Day at School</a> (E)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Taped Library Tour</a> (M)</li> <li>- <a href="#">First Day of Class</a> (M)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Orientation Meeting</a> (M)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Reading Time</a> (E)</li> <li>- <a href="#">School Report</a> (M)</li> <li>- <a href="#">World of Computers</a> (M)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Professional Babysitting</a> (D)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Learning to Learn</a> (D)</li> </ul>	talking about education and employment
3	Living Arrangments <a href="#">Interactive Crossword</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <a href="#">Homestay in the USA</a> (M)</li> <li>- <a href="#">No Place Like Home</a> (M)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Saturday's Chores</a> (M)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Student Living</a> (M)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Home Repairs</a> (D)</li> <li>- <a href="#">Housing Complaints</a> (D)</li> </ul>	finding a place to live; describing living conditions

Mr. Davis has chosen to concentrate on listening and conversation activities, rather than try to be all things to all people. He does, nevertheless, offer several helpful ancillaries in addition to the main pages outlined above.

USING ESL LAB
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <a href="#">WHAT'S NEW</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">Add a Link</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">Contact</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">Donate</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">Downloads</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">FAQs</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">FREE Handouts</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">First-Time Users</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">Help With Audio</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">License Content</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">Links</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">Media Players</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">Search</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">Study Guides</a></li> <li>- <a href="#">Tips for Teachers</a></li> </ul>

Instructors as well as language learners will appreciate his detailed instructions about working with the audio files in "Help with audio." The sound files are not complicated, all are either .wav or RealAudio files, though the student may need to download and install the RealPlayer software. "First-time users" offers a guide to navigate the site for those just discovering the cyber lab. Also provided are "Free handouts" that enable learners to keep track of their progress and understand completely how the site works. The "FAQs" are also helpful for all, and the "Tips for teachers" provide special assistance to this group of users. The site was mainly designed for self-access and individual learning, but clearly the creator welcomes any pedagogical support.

**www.Breaking News English.com**  
**Ready-to-use EFL / ESL Lesson Plans**

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**Breaking News English** is a more modest site also dedicated to providing good comprehensible input (CI) for ESL and EFL learners. As is the case for Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab, this site is the product of one person, Sean Banville. Each day a new listening file and accompanying lesson is added. The material comes from "breaking news" stories, hence the title of the site. The author's idea is that students can listen to and subsequently discuss CI containing information about topics they would generally be discussing in their first language (personal communication, July 14, 2005). The home page gives a general explanation of the materials provided on the site:

## Lesson Plans

All of these current events lesson plans contain a news article, listening (MP3 file), communication activities, pair work, discussion, reading and vocabulary exercises. Classroom handouts are reproducible in Word and PDF.

### Today's Lesson

- 2005-07-21: The 50 must-see children's films

[easier lesson](#) | [harder lesson](#)

The lessons and associated listening files are graded "easier" and "harder." These designations reflect the speed of the news broadcast, the vocabulary and idioms involved in the news story, and the difficulty of the related activities. In many cases, a wide variety of activities are presented, allowing students or teachers to select those that they prefer. Each lesson begins with suggested "Warm-ups," followed by "Before reading/listening" activities, a "While reading/listening" section, an "After reading/listening" section, and a "Discussion" portion with guiding questions for partner practice. Other activities included in many lessons are cloze exercises, charts, and tables that students complete and then use as a basis for conversation practice, matching tasks, and true/false comprehension checks.

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## The 50 must-see children's films

**Date:** Jul 21, 2005

**Level:** Easier (Try the [harder lesson](#).)

**Downloads:** [Word Doc](#) | [PDF Doc](#) | [Listening](#)

**Audio:** (1:56 - 228.4 KB - 16kbps)

To download the listening, right-click or option-click the link.

As demonstrated here, each lesson is headed by the date of the news, the level of difficulty, download options for the activities and audio, and the length of the audio file. Information on using Podcast software for using Breaking News English audio files with a computer or MP3 player is clearly presented as well.

Archived materials go back to November 1, 2004; the audio archives go back to April 11, 2005. Links to approximately 2 weeks' worth of lessons are presented on the home page. There is a link to older archived lessons on each page that takes the learner back successively a month at a time. The news stories are composites taken from a variety of sources, including the BBC World Service radio, the BBC and CNN television news, press releases posted on the Internet, and Internet news sites. Mr. Banville researches the information and topics from these sources and then writes the articles used in the lessons. Several different sources are used for each story in order to corroborate its veracity. This approach enables him to include and/or focus on particular vocabulary items and idiomatic expressions, as he can word the stories accordingly. The author views the concentration on lexical items (and the parallel dearth of attention on structure and/or grammar) as a means to emphasize communication.

## CONCLUSION

The relationships among the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are complex and intertwined, suggesting a scaffolding of mutual support. A focus on and practice in any one skill area contributes to overall movement along the interlanguage continuum, making knowledge available for application to the other skill areas (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). Oral language development is clearly a key skill for second language learners, but it does not stand alone. As we see in these sites, audio-based second language learning activities can also integrate written components and serve as a jumping off place for interactive conversation practice as well. Listening to natural speech can be daunting for many language learners. Embedding the audio in a context with pedagogically sound pre- and post-listening activities and focusing the listener's attention through activities that help motivate the listener to try to understand all help make the audio more comprehensible. Delivery of a wide variety of meaningful and interesting CI is facilitated by Internet technology, giving students easier access to the tools that can help them develop their language skills either in the context of a class or on an independent basis as lifelong learners.

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## REFERENCES

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